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ABSTRACT

The publishers and editors of 61 metropolitan or regional magazines responded to a questionnaire designed to assess the current state of the local magazine market. Most of the respondents cited the "community pride" theme as the biggest reason for the rapid increase in popularity of "local" magazines, and the fact that the affluent and educated audience was very attractive to advertisers. Poor local news coverage by newspapers and television was also cited as a reason for the growth of such publications. Respondents also cited several major problems facing local magazines, including competition for advertising and circulation from newer publications entering the market and the difficulty of attracting national advertising. Rising costs and difficulty in attracting competent writers were also reported as problems. In response the question of what they were doing to solve some of these problems, most publishers mentioned increasing sales efforts, educating advertisers about their product, and upgrading the quality of their magazines. They also planned to study reader interests, and explore ways to cut costs. (HTH)

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Advertising Division

METROPOLITAN MAGAZINE BOOM CONTINUES, BUT PROBLEMS REMAIN

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In 1977 Fletcher identified the significance of the growth and impact of city magazines on the local media marketplace. He reported the findings of a survey of publishers and editors of city magazines listed in the August 27, 1976 Standard Rate and Data Service (SRDS) consumer magazine volume. Forty-eight city magazines were listed and 36 completed and returned Fletcher's questionnaire.[1] In January 1979, Advertising Age published brief descriptions of the advertising rates and editorial content of 80 state, city and regional magazines which the editors acknowledged as being "by no means comprehensive."[2] Media Decisions published a relatively comprehensive list of 165 city and state magazines in its April 1979 issue.[3] By May, 1980 the listing under the metropolitan magazine classification in SRDS had grown to include 125 magazines of which 115 can truly be called metropolitan magazines.[4] Most recently, Advertising Age updated their 1979 report on metropolitan magazines with a new list which included 106 magazines.[5]

As these data indicate, the metropolitan magazine boom has continued. Not only has the number of magazines in this category increased, but new and different kinds of metropolitan magazines have entered the media marketplace. This growth is partially responsible for the current term "metropolitan" magazine as opposed to the earlier description of these publications as "city" magazines. Today, in addition to the standard city magazine, some publishers have been experimenting with shelter magazines geared specifically to the local marketplace and its unique problems. The "Home/Garden" concept, as it is called, has been tried in Houston, Dallas/Fort Worth and several other markets.[6] Business and sports magazines that focus on the local scene can also be found among the growing list of local magazines which fit loosely under the metropolitan magazine umbrella. Also, some metropolitan magazines are not metropolitan at all, but are better termed state or regional magazines. Examples of these magazines are Down East (Maine), Texas Monthly and Chesapeake Bay Magazine

(Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Delaware and Washington, D. C.).[7] The common denominator among these magazines is that they are local in their orientation. And "local" can mean anything from a town, city or county to a state or region.

In this study publishers and editors of 115 metropolitan magazines, as listed in SRDS[8], were surveyed to obtain their perceptions of the place of their publications in the current media marketplace. The publishers and editors were sent a four page questionnaire which asked about the nature of their editorial and advertising staffs, competitive pressures, and problems they face in producing a marketable product. A followup questionnaire mailed three weeks after the initial mailing produced a net response rate of 53 percent. Sixty one publishers and editors responded, mostly with lengthy answers to the open end questions.[9]

Interestingly, 33 of the 61 responding magazine publishers and editors had responded to the 1979 Advertising Age survey and 39 of the 61 responded to Advertising Age's most recently published section on metropolitan magazines. This seems to indicate a responsiveness on the part of these publishers and editors to complete and return questionnaires while others apparently are more reluctant to cooperate. This reluctance might be due to the relatively small staffs employed by the publishers coupled with the deluge of questionnaires they appear to be receiving. One respondent replied, "This is the 475th questionnaire I've filled out." The 53 percent response rate would be considered strong without these qualifications, but looks stronger in light of the current popularity of metropolitan magazines among survey researchers.

Reasons for growth. According to SRDS, of the 61 responding magazines, 38 were founded in the five year period 1975-1979, compared with 20 in the preceding five year period and 13 in the period before that. And circulations of the magazines included in Fletcher's earlier study have increased by an average of 32.8 percent. Clearly the growth has come primarily in recent years. Why?

(TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE)

The "localness" and "sense of community" themes run throughout most of the answers received. In fact, no fewer than 34 of the 61 responses mentioned the importance of their type of magazine in covering the local scene, and by doing so, appealing to pride in community. Indicative of this line of reasoning are the following responses:

Burton Cohen of MPLS-St. Paul:

> The good ones are able to target in on their audiences' specific, community-related interests, while providing the quality, color and ambience of a national magazine. They truly serve readers needs and interests.

Rick Graetz of Montana Magazine:

> Because they cover subjects of local interest. . . people get the feeling that the particular publication is their own. In Montana, Montana Magazine is considered "Your Montana."

Charles G. Meyst, formerly of Richmond Lifestyle:

> Metropolitan or city magazines provide the only medium which has the capability of establishing the "identity and flavor" of a market. No other medium. . .has the opportunity of position, through both editorial and design, to capture the true "picture" of the market it serves.

An interesting contrast is the comment by Paul Lison, of Monthly Detroit, who observed, "Metro magazines are actually not that new, but current trends in suburban living and changing life styles of the affluent 35-55 year old adultshave popularized them. People in this age group identify with their city regardless of its national stature."

Joseph Shore of Atlanta said, "The typical city magazine reader's average income is somewhere over $35,000 a year with the median age around 39 and this young, affluent audience presents an ideal opportunity for marketing for local advertisers."

Tony Petrella of Lansing Magazine said, "The people we strive to attract are those in the upper demographics in terms of income and education. The prevailing attitude among publishers is "Class -- not Mass."

Sylvan Meyer of Miami Magazine summed it up:

> They effectively target on active, involved and affluent markets and so offer advertisers prospects capable of responding to major sales efforts and high ticket items at a low per response cost. Obviously, people with money spend more than people without money; fashion conscious, style conscious, style conscious people on the rise spend more than people who could care less.

Joseph Shore sums up the major reason given for the phenomenal growth of metropolitan magazines succinctly:

> For these reasons, selective advertising to specific markets, keying in on the higher income levels in your area, and local editorial which appears in these publications, we feel that metro magazines will be one of the fastest growing categories in 1980.

Of course, metropolitan magazines might not be able to appeal to the local interests of a relatively upscaled market without a gap in editorial coverage left by both national and local media. The ability of metropolitan magazines to jump in and grab the opportunity to fill this gap is captured by the comment by Agnes Ash, of Palm Beach Life, who said, "Because newspapers are not doing their job. Because regional TV is so bad. Because magazines offer quality print and advertisers need excellent color to sell quality products."

Remaining Problems. Although the opportunity for metropolitan magazines is apparent and many publishers have grasped at the opportunity to run a magazine, many of the problems that existed five ago are still of central concern to most publishers. The two most frequently reported problems deal with advertising support and circulation. The very things that make metropolitan magazines unique (i.e., selectivity) also cause them problems in generating advertising revenue and increasing circulation. The ever increasing expenses of printing and mailing is a problem for all magazines. On the editorial side,

just finding good, dependable writers remains a problem. A new problem, partially due to the success of metropolitan magazines, is competition from new magazine entries in the local media marketplace. Roughly a third of those responding identified advertising support as a major problem. Attracting national advertisers appears to be the most problematic. Persuading national advertisers that metropolitan magazines are a cost efficient way to reach the local, affluent market is still a problem to be overcome. This problem is heightened by the fact that two thirds of the publishers responding indicated that more than 50 percent of their revenue comes from advertising. The following responses were typical of most publishers' concern.

Stanley E. Flink of Connecticut Travels:

> Like any other magazine that has been publishing less than three years, we find advertising suppor the most difficult problem. But it is one we are sure time and effort will overcome.

Joseph Shore of Atlanta:

> Advertising support is a never ending battle. The major competition for any city magazine is the local newspaper, which gets 99% of all the advertising dollars in the city.

Tony Petrella of Lansing Magazine:

> Like all magazines, advertiser support is definitely the major factor in overall health and growth and success. In today's economy competition for those dollars is more stringent than ever and requires greater planning and emphasis.

Thirty seven percent of the publishers responding identified circulation and distribution of their product as a major problem. This problem area has several facets. Newsstand cooperation and distribution were mentioned by many of the larger city oriented metropolitan magazines. Subscription renewals also appear to be a major problem, especially considering climbing postal rates and the cost of using direct mail promotions to obtain renewals and new subscriptions.

John W. Hoffman of Denver Monthly, noted that circulation is his greatest problem. He said that new subscriptions are expensive and that although direct mail is best way to boost numbers, cost is too high.

Monthly Detroit's Paul Lisor said that distribution to newsstand dealers is his major problem. "It is very imprecise and requires great time and attention."

Sylvan Meyer, of Miami Magazine said, "...it is difficult to know the nature of the audience and define in numbers the precise size of our potential reader universe. Building circulation is expensive and risky and renewals are always a problem..."

Twenty four percent of those responding mentioned increased costs as a major problem, especially in light of a weakening economy and continued inflation. The costs of distribution, printing, personnel and paper have all hit the magazine industry hard and metropolitian magazines perhaps the hardest. Since many metropolitan magazines are still struggling to establish themselves, increasing costs coupled with the problem of advertising support have made it difficult for them to stay in business. At least one publisher said that strorg financial backing is necessary to get past the first few money-losing years. The following answers highlight these problems.

Erika Corpron of Commerce Magazine:

> Main problems are rising production costs and postal rates. It is difficult to raise advertising rates every year to cover increased costs.

H. Allen Fernald of Down East:

> Largest problem is rapidly escalating cost of making and delivering the magazine. Paper, printing, and postage seem to rise more rapidly than we can raise prices. Although we have stayed ahead of the snapping jaws of inflation over the past three years, I have my doubts about the future.

Obtaining good writers, both freelance and staff writers, continues to be difficult. One publisher noted, in particular, that hiring reporters away from the local newspaper was no solution since, as he said, "newspaper reporters are the worst."

Solutions to the problems. When asked about what they were doing to solve the problems facing them, publishers' answers ranged from the humorous, "we pray a lot," to the honest, "no easy answers." Regarding advertising support, most mentioned increasing their sales effort, educating advertisers about their product, and continuing to work on the image and quality of their magazines. Solutions to circulation problems included using research to identify readers' interests, promoting their publications on radio and TV, improving newsstand distribution, increasing special interest sections, and staying alert to local trends. To cut down on the expense of publishing their magazines some publishers are considering trimming their staffs, going to a lighter weight paper, and operating on a smaller budget. The solution that seemed to appear most often in response to a myriad of problems was simply "working damn hard."

An observation. Although metropolitan magazines have found a niche in the local media marketplace, television, with its new cable technology, is also discovering that segmenting an audience can be profitable. The boom in cable technology is yet to hit hard, but the emergence of "all news," "all movie," and "all sports" networks is here. It appears that the magazine format can be transferred to television. If this is so, metropolitan magazines might find their competition is not solely newspapers and other traditional media, but cable television. As television cable technology becomes more cost efficient, television may soon be able to enter the local markets with a product at least as competitive as that that metropolitan magazines now have to offer.

FOOTNOTES

1. Alan D. Fletcher, "City Magazines Find a Niche in the Media Marketplace," Journalism Quarterly, 54: 740-43; (Winter 1977).

2. "All Sizes and Styles, But They're Local," Advertising Age, January 22, 1979, 510-528.

3. "Media Decisions Directory of 165 City and State Magazines," Media Decisions, April 1979, 124-136.

4. SRDS, May, 1980.

5. "Scorecard: The Local Lineup," Advertising Age, March 30, 1981, 517-530.

6. "City Shelter Books Come Closest to Home," Media Decisions, April 1979, 102.

7. "All Sizes and Styles, But They're Local," Advertising Age, January 22, 1979, 510; 516; 528.

8. Op. Cit.

9. The authors wish to express their appreciation to the publishers and editors of these magazines who responded to the questionnaire: Aloha, Atlanta, Atlantic City Magazine, Buffalo Spree, Central Florida Scene, Charlotte Magazine, Chesapeake Bay Magazine, Chicago Sportscene, City, Cleveland, Colorado Business, Colorado Woman, Commerce Magazine, Connecticut Magazine, Connecticut Travels, Crain's Chicago Business, D Magazine, Dallas/Fort Worth Home/Garden, Dayton Magazine, Denver Magazine, Denver Monthly, Down East, Erie Magazine, Exclusively Yours, Wisconsin, Gold Coast of Florida, Houston Magazine, Hudson Valley, Jacksonville Magazine, Kansas City, Lansing Magazine, Louisville, Louisville Today, Memphis, Miami Magazine, Missouri Life, MPLS-St. Paul, Montana Magazine, Monthly Detroit, Nashville!, New Mexico Magazine, New Orleans Magazine, New Worlds, Ohio Magazine, Orange County Home and Garden, Orange County Illustrated, Oregon Magazine, Orlando-Land Magazine, Palm Beach Life, Palm Beach Societal Pictorial, Palm Springs Life, Phoenix Magazine, Playsure Magazine, Richmond-Lifestyle, Sacramento, St. Louis, San Diego Magazine, San Francisco Focus, Shenandoah, Southern Accents, Texas Monthly, and Utah Holiday Magazine.

TABLE I

Growth in Metropolitan Magazines

Circulations, 1976 - 1980

	1976 Circulation Total	1980	Percentage Change
Atlanta	27,613	39,993	+ 44.8
Baltimore	15,000	46,677	+211.2
Boston	39,971	85,220	+113.2
Broward Life (Ft. Lauderdale)	19,700	14,496	- 26.4
Buffalo Spree	18,000	20,000	+ 11.1
Central Scene (Orlando)	6,500	10,000	+ 53.8
Chicago	154,064	186,392	+ 21.0
Cincinnati	14,585	23,947	+ 64.2
Cleveland	40,836	52,864	+ 29.5
Dallas	11,103	15,000	+ 35.1
D, The Magazine of Dallas	37,265	60,237	+ 61.6
Exclusively Yours, Wisconsin	31,753	39,443	+ 24.2
Fairfield County (Connecticut)	26,500	26,000	- 1.9
Gold Coast Pictorial (Ft. Lauderdale)	15,166	30,000	+ 97.8
Honolulu	26,740	22,922	- 14.3
Houston	13,472	16,626	+ 23.4
Houston Home and Garden	35,006	77,571	+121.6
Hudson Valley	20,000	23,900	+ 19.5
Los Angeles	121,117	158,159	+ 30.6
Louisville	8,873	11,140	+ 25.5
Metro (Newport News, Va.)	20,303	20,237	- 0.3
Miami	25,900	17,279	- 33.3
MPLS	23,921	39,853	+ 66.6
Nashville!	11,148	23,090	+107.1
New Mexico	71,222	72,685	+ 2.1
New Orleans	24,545	40,500	+ 65.0
New Worlds	61,247	102,958	+ 68.1
Orange County Illustrated (California)	22,852	16,368	- 28.4
Orlando-Land	28,104	26,068	- 7.2
Palm Springs Life	61,938	65,431	+ 5.6
Philadelphia	121,697	136,627	+ 12.3
Phoenix	58,061	29,379	- 49.4
Pittsburgh	38,793	50,767	+ 30.9
San Diego	22,369	46,476	+107.8
San Francisco	36,385	36,242	- 0.4
St. Louis	25,000	44,000	+ 76.0
Texas Monthly	158,007	247,151	+ 56.4
Washingtonian	59,150	100,874	+ 70.5
Westchester	30,000	27,148	- 9.5
TOTAL	1,583,906	2,103,720	+ 32.8

Source: SRDS, August, 1976; May 1980